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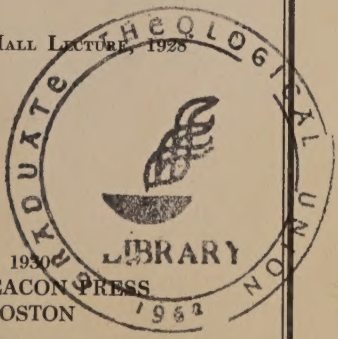
CHRISTIANITY

and the

RELIGIOUS DRAMA

By R. H. U. BLOOR, B. A.

THE ESSEX HALL LECTURE, 1928



1930
THE BEACON PRESS
BOSTON

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1880
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1930

The Lindsey Press

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
RICHARD CLAY & SONS, LIMITED,
BUNGAY, SUFFOLK.

F583
B623

PREFACE

The Essex Hall Lecture was established with the object of providing an opportunity for the free utterance of the thoughts of a selected speaker on some religious theme of general interest.

The first lecture was delivered in 1893 by the Rev. Stopford A. Brooke, on "The Development of Theology, as illustrated in English Poetry from 1780 to 1830"; and the range of topics is suggested by the following selection from the list of subjects: "The Relation of Jesus to His Age and our Own," by the Rev. Dr. J. Estlin Carpenter; "The Immortality of the Soul in the Poems of Tennyson and Browning," by Professor Sir Henry Jones; "Heresy, its Ancient Wrongs and Modern Rights," by the Rev. Alex. Gordon; "The Religious Philosophy of Plotinus, and some Modern Philosophies of Religion," by the Rev. Dr. Inge, Dean of St. Paul's; "Christianity Applied to the

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Life of Men and of Nations," by Bishop Gore; " The Lost Radiance of the Christian Religion," by Dr. L. P. Jacks; "The Moral Basis of the League of Nations," by Viscount Cecil, "Some Aspects of Free Thought," by the Earl of Oxford and Asquith, and "Man in the Light of Evolution," by Prof. J. Arthur Thomson.

A list of the lectures still in print will be found on page 63.

Essex Hall, London.

CHRISTIANITY AND THE RELIGIOUS DRAMA

The fair humanities of old religion.—COLERIDGE.

I CANNOT begin this lecture without first acknowledging my very great appreciation of the honour that has been done me in my being invited to address you this afternoon. And I assure you that I shall not abuse that privilege by trying to convert you to any definite theory. My whole intention is to be suggestive. The general idea that I have in my mind is the reaction of ordinary human nature on any system of religious belief. That is a large and, perhaps, a vague idea. But I shall confine myself to Christianity, and further limit myself, by considering that reaction of human nature on Christianity which shows itself in the development of the Religious Drama.

Those of you who know your Gibbon will

remember the ironical prelude that opens the two famous chapters wherein he treats of Christianity. That prelude concludes with these sentences: "The theologian may indulge the pleasing task of describing religion as she descended from heaven, arrayed in her native purity. A more melancholy duty is laid on the historian. He must discover the inevitable mixture of error and corruption, which she contracted in a long residence upon earth among a weak and degenerate race of beings." All sound Unitarians are ready to be convinced of the errors and corruptions that deflected Christianity from her pristine purity, for has not the ubiquitous and bellicose Dr. Priestley bequeathed us volumes on the subject? But for all that, there is another side to Gibbon's argument, and one that makes the historian's duty a little less melancholy. It is possible to imagine that a religion in all its native purity, fresh from heaven, may be too ethereal for our poor world. It may be that something is to be learned, something forgotten; and that as travel broadens and

humanizes men and women, so a long residence on earth may even humanize a religion, and fit it better for its work of mercy and regeneration.

Gibbon had to do with a view of Christianity that was rife in the eighteenth century: a view that is put forth with such cogency of argument and such precision of style in a book like Paley's *Evidences of Christianity*. The argument is that Christianity came into a world in every way opposed to it. That all its ideals were alien. That it could meet with nothing but hostility. Yet in the teeth of this fierce opposition it triumphed. And so it must have been a miraculous and supernatural thing.

Now, from the standpoint of modern thought, it would not be too much to say that the exact opposite of this is true. Christianity won because it had so much to offer.

What it had to offer is summed up on an eloquent page in Lecky's *History of European Morals*. It amounts roughly to this. Christianity had a message freed from

national and local ties, a message eminently fitted for the Roman world. It was a message to the heart, as well as to the mind. It brought hope to the slave as well as light to the philosopher. It made a special appeal to women. It could satisfy the curious fantasy of the mystic and the practical realism of the plain man. It indulged freely in the marvellous, but its feet were set in paths of unflinching rectitude. It had as its central figure an ideal being, in the form of a man, who spoke as never man spoke, but who spoke the very poetry of compassion for human infirmity.

But surely we do not regard it as coming from heaven fully equipped with all these attributes. We have a Teacher. We have his life. We have his utterances. And we have a world at a certain critical moment, a world of dying gods and perishing ideals. But a world looking—and yearning. And to that world Christianity gave a response and some fulfilment of its needs. Humanity asked, and it received, and gradually found what it most wanted. And this has been

the glory of Christianity throughout history. It has proved itself to be an organism capable of life, growth, and expansion, in a changing environment of thought and feeling. What it has been at any given moment is a small matter in comparison with its eternal promise of what it can become.

Here, then, is the subject of the reaction of human nature on Christianity. Let me now come to my special part of that subject—the Religious Drama of the Middle Ages.

Drama, Aristotle tells us, is an imitation of the actions of men. Nothing reflects the life and ideas of a people as drama does. For most of us the Middle Ages lie in huge dusty folios to "dry-rot at ease till the Judgment Day." If we know the period at all, we probably know it only from the ecclesiastical and theological point of view. In its drama we shall find the ecclesiastical and theological elements in all their strength and energy. But we shall see another element intruding—human nature, finding its expression in dramatic form, working

within a convention, and producing most interesting results. I doubt whether any other study would give us so complete a picture of the period, or would correct so many of the false ideas about it that are just now so prevalent. This drama was quite an independent thing. Out of crude ritual dances in honour of vegetation gods, Greece had produced a drama. By the power of genius, under stress of historical circumstance, it had become a rare and noble form of art. And then it became but a memory. Rome, strictly speaking, never had a drama. If she had anything that can be called a national theatre, it was the Coliseum, where the gladiatorial combats were held.

She loved the games men played with death,
Where death must win.

The favourite forms of theatrical entertainment among the Romans seem to have been the mime and the pantomime. The mime was a farce, burlesquing a mythological story. Its chief attractions were

indecent love scenes and suggestive dancing. Men and women acted together in it. The men wore gaudy harlequin clothes. The women danced nearly naked. The pantomime was especially patronized by the aristocracy. The subject was taken from mythology or history. The words were sung by a chorus, and the action was accompanied by a full orchestra of citherns, lyres, flutes, cymbals, and shields. The actor wore a mask with the lips closed. He did not speak, but told the story in gesture. The performance reached a marvellous pitch of perfection. But some indelicate love-myth, full of amorous situations, was the favourite theme. Christianity looked in horror on the lust and cruelty of the Roman stage. As the Church gained in power, the theatre slowly perished. It died hard. In fact, it took such an unconscionable time in dying that it seems finally to have been buried alive. It was driven underground to reappear in queer fantastic disguises.

The drama of the Middle Ages was a new

creation, a most characteristic thing, that arose in the very bosom of the Church, and was evolved from her liturgy.

All that the people had in the way of æsthetic emotions was given them by religion. To the soul worn out by the hardness of life, the Church was the holy house of delight. Her pomps and ceremonies were a thrilling joy. Dull eyes and ears opened to her enchantments. What a beautiful thing was the Mass! And it was already a drama. A drama in its form: chants alternating with readings; dialogues between the celebrant, the clerks, and the faithful. A drama also in its essence, for it was the symbolical commemoration of the great sacrifice. The priest became as God, and God spoke:—"This is my body!—This is my blood!"

But it is in the variation brought about by having a particular office for the day that we find the source of the drama: the prayers and readings which vividly recalled some divine act, some saint, or some martyr. Those fresh and charming epics of the young

religion, the *Gospels*, the *Acts of the Apostles*, were so recited as to give emphasis to the cycle of the Christian year. And the story of Christianity was in itself a drama, full of romantic and touching scenes—the Birth of Jesus; the simple Shepherds; the Wise Men from the East; the flight into Egypt; the life with the disciples; the miracles; the entry into Jerusalem; the Last Supper; the Betrayal in the Garden by Judas; the Trial; the Crucifixion; the watching by the Grave; the Resurrection. And the church, with all that its architecture suggested, was a theatre to hand. And what were numbers of the faithful but just ignorant, unlettered children, to be instructed, impressed, awed, warned, frightened?

It was out of the Easter ritual that spoken Religious Drama took its actual rise in the ninth century. It had become customary to insert additional melodies in the antiphonal music. These melodies were at first sung merely to vowel sounds. Then words were put to them. At Easter, of course, the words specially fitted the occasion, and they

take the form of a dramatic chorus with question and answer.

Quem quæritis in sepulchro, Christicolæ?
Iesum Nazarenum crucifixum, o cælicolæ.
Non est hic : surrexit sicut prædixerat ;
Ite, nuntiate quia surrexit de sepulchro.[1]

With this can be associated a little piece of dramatic ritual, the burial of a crucifix in a sepulchre, and its removal. Quite naturally out of these elements was developed a simple play acted in the church. We have a full description of it. Four of the brethren, suitably robed, played the chief parts. One of them, representing the angel, sat by the sepulchre with a palm in his hand. The other three, representing the women coming to the tomb, walked slowly up the church. The brother by the sepulchre chanted the *Quem quæritis*. The three replied in unison. And when bidden to go and announce that Christ had risen, they turned to the choir,

[1] *Whom seek ye in the sepulchre, O followers of Christ? Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified, O inhabitants of heaven.*
He is not here : he has risen, even as he foretold ; Go ye, proclaim that he has risen from the sepulchre.

uttering the words *Alleluia! resurrexit Dominus!* Then the one by the tomb recalled them: *Venite et videte locum.* He showed them the grave empty of the cross, with only the cloth in which it had been wrapped. This was held up, and then placed reverently on the altar. Now the choir began the hymn *Te Deum laudamus.* And all the bells chimed out together.

Other festivals soon produced their special little plays. One was done at Christmas with the Shepherds, the Wise Men, the two Herods and the flight into Egypt. At Christmas too was played a *Procession of the Prophets.* There were some strange recruits among them, Balaam and his Ass, Nebuchadnezzar, Virgil, and the Sibyl. They all came to bear witness to Christ.

And I would specially emphasize one thing, because it has not been emphasized sufficiently. As this drama arose out of the Easter ritual, so its central idea was the risen Christ. This determined its whole development. It was planned to lead up to this. This was the ecclesiastical conven-

tion. It may have proved dramatic in result. But in intention, it was theological and didactic. The human elements of sentiment, pathos, humour, love of rant, and delight in horrors and ribaldry—all these had to find play within the convention, and they did so with remarkable ingenuity. But the convention supplied the framework. After the drama had left the church for the market-place and village green, and had become a huge cycle of biblical plays, we can see the original ecclesiastical design in the choice of those plays. They were not chosen haphazard with a mere eye to dramatic effect. They were according to the theological plan of salvation. Christ had triumphed over sin and death. So in the first play we have the fall of certain angels through pride. Then the creation of the world, and man and woman, with the entrance of sin and death into that world through a fallen angel. Then the murder of Abel, who represents the first innocent victim of sin. The increase of wickedness brings the Flood. Then appears Abraham, the

father of promise, and the sacrifice of his son Isaac prefigures the great sacrifice of Christ. Then we pass on to the redemption of the Jews from bondage. And so we come to the New Testament. The birth of Christ and other incidents of his life are followed by all those vivid scenes of the Passion. Then follows the Resurrection, and finally mankind is summoned to the general resurrection, and Christ descends to earth for the Judgment.

Such was the plan that Religious Drama finally accomplished, more or less completely. But it did not accomplish this till long after it had passed from church to town. By this time other motives than merely didactic ones were at work. And it shows the strength of the theological element that it should have continued to formulate the general plan, and so force all varieties and additions to be made within it. Of course it must have been largely due to the fact that clerics always had a hand in the composition of the plays.

The liturgical drama reached its height

about the thirteenth century. It could develop no further as drama until it cut itself off from the Church Service. The transition seems to have been gradual. Naturally, the writer got interested in his play. He wanted to get the full effect of his scenes, and felt that he was limited by the exactions of the liturgy. A most interesting example of Religious Drama in its transition is a play which, according to its Latin title, should be called *The Bridegroom*, but is generally known as *The Wise and Foolish Virgins*. This, though acted in a church, is not a liturgical play. But it is a play essentially for one of the Church seasons—that of Advent, when the second coming of Christ was especially emphasized. It puts the parable as told by the Evangelist into dramatic form, making the most of every bit of the narrative, and showing a consummate mastery of the conflicting emotions of pathos and terror. The despairing anguish of the foolish virgins is followed by the pitiless rigour with which the play closes.

It opens with a prologue, announcing the

coming of the bridegroom, who is Christ. The play then begins. The angel Gabriel warns the virgins not to oversleep themselves. Probably after the angel's warning there would be a pause. The heads of five of the women begin to droop. They pretend to sleep. Suddenly the silence is sharply broken. A cry rings out. The virgins start up, and the five see with terror that their lamps have gone out. They beg the other virgins to help them, and at the end of each Latin verse is a piteous refrain in the language of the people, undoubtedly inserted in order that the ignorant might fully grasp the situation.

O! unhappy ones! wretched ones!—we have overslept.

The attitude of their more fortunate sisters shows all the callousness of the self-righteous. They bid them go to the merchants, and ask politely for oil. And this they do in utter distress. The merchants, probably played by members of the lower clergy, speak in Provençal. They repulse them, and bid them go back. And now we

see them wandering about the church in an agony of distraction, crying on the bridegroom to open the door to them. Meanwhile, the wise virgins have disappeared, probably behind the altar, intended to represent the wedding-chamber. Then, to the poor desperate women suddenly appears the Christ. In the hard, short, staccato, Latin lines that he speaks there is a hopeless finality :

Amen dico,
Vos ignosco,
Nam caretis lumine,
Quod qui perdunt
Procul pergunt
Hujus aulæ limine.[1]

And he adds to this a dismissal to eternal punishment, spoken in Provençal. This is followed by a stage direction : " Then let the devils receive them, and let them be hurled into hell."

We see here a great advance in drama.

[1] *Verily I say,*
I know you not,
For ye lack the light,
And those that lose it
Far do they depart
From the threshold of this chamber.

There is the awakening, and the contrast of the two sets of virgins; there are the realistic merchants; there are the devils, and probably there was some representation of the fiery terrors of hell. But the emotional side is still more striking and significant. The priestly desire to impress, warn, and terrify, is evident in all its power. The language of the audience is used, that nothing may be lost. Yet the human instinct is as strong as the doctrinal in the dramatist, and the frantic despair of the virgins, so prominent in speech and action, must have filled the spectators with pity. The lamentations in their own language did more than make the spectators understand, they must have stirred sympathy in many hearts.

If the separation of Religious Drama from the liturgy meant an advance on the human side, there would be a still further advance in this direction when the drama should leave the church. It left it for many reasons. I need not discuss them, for it seems to me that the move from the church was a natural

consequence of development. We can see it in process of removal, for, fortunately, we have a play that is half-in and half-out. It is an *Old Testament* play. But it was undoubtedly developed from the Christmas play of the *Procession of the Prophets*, to which I have already alluded. There was a tendency to carry back those *Old Testament* worthies who had witnessed to Christ, until they included Adam, the first man. And as these worthies appeared in procession, many of them would naturally suggest stories that could be dramatized: Daniel and the Lions; Balaam and his Ass, and so on. The particular play of which I am speaking is in three parts. One deals with Adam and Eve, one with Cain and Abel; and the third part consists of a *Procession of the Prophets*.

The old writer is a lover of drama. He wants everything to be thoroughly good. His directions as to scenery and costume are quite elaborate. The Paradise for Adam and Eve is to have sweet-smelling flowers, and there are to be trees with various kinds of fruit, so that the place may appear very

agreeable. The Saviour is to be robed in a dalmatic, Adam in a red tunic, Eve in white, with a white silk veil. He also lays great stress on good acting. Adam is to speak at the right moment, neither too soon nor too late, and the speech of all the other characters is to be distinct, and their gestures appropriate. A choir chanted in the church. God appears from the church, and, after giving orders to Adam, returns to the church. The words chanted are in Latin. The play was acted outside the church, and is in Norman-French. Karl Mantzius, in his book on *Theatrical Art*, says of the temptation of Eve by Satan: "We read this part with pleasure and respect. Satan successively plays upon all the weak points of woman—her appetite for dainties, her vanity, her curiosity, her jealousy, and her secret dislike of man." There is an abundance of devils, who cut capers throughout the play. At the end they rush in and drag Adam and Eve off to hell in fetters. In the second part we have the quarrel of Cain with Abel. Cain in a fury throws himself on Abel and

slays him. The author is so enthusiastic over this murder that, to avoid accidents, he adds a stage direction in the nature of " safety first " : " Abel shall have a saucepan beneath his garment, against which Cain shall knock when he pretends to kill him." Here we have drama with a human gusto; the writer becoming absorbed in the psychology of a problem, or showing his anxiety to get a convincing effect.

The separation of the drama from the liturgy is usually associated with Hilarius, a disciple of the great Abelard, and probably an Englishman. I would just mention one of the plays of Hilarius, because it introduces another type, not taken from scripture, but dealing with a saint—in this case St. Nicholas. It was probably acted in a church, but it is frankly comic. The characters consist of a " barbarian," the image of St. Nicholas, half a dozen robbers, and the blessed Saint. The barbarian entrusts all his possessions to the image, telling him to take good care of them. He is so assured of their safety that he does not even take the precaution to shut

the door. Immediately he has gone, the robbers appear, and as no one is apparently guarding the treasure, they remove it. The barbarian returns, and, finding it gone, gives way to his feelings in a mixture of Latin and French, with a great deal of vigour in it :—

What confounded luck, I say,
I left my treasures here to-day
And now they're spirited away.
Devil take it !—I declare
It makes a fellow want to swear !

He accuses the image, and in the end gives it a sound whipping. The blessed saint is much distressed at these unseemly proceedings. He goes to the robbers, remonstrates with them, and they restore all that they have stolen. The barbarian is so overwhelmed that he becomes a Christian.

Thus before the play had left the church, and during the whole period of transition, we can see the leaven of dramatic instinct at work. It introduced the language of the people. It mingled human interests with theological, sometimes blurring the issue, sometimes tending to extinguish sound

doctrine by sentiment or laughter. During the fourteenth century Religious Drama came "on the road." It passed out of the church and away from the church-yard, to the town and the village green, and became a popular entertainment. This secularization was a most natural thing. It was a process going on everywhere. Look at the mediæval pilgrimages. They had once been solemn, even dangerous, undertakings. Now they were becoming half-serious holiday jaunts with song and bag-pipes, tales and jokes. Such is the pilgrimage in Chaucer. And what an opportunity it gave him! He brings together a motley collection of men and women who represent the whole of England, clerical and lay—knightly, professional, commercial, and rustic; a rollicking sailor; a jolly inn-keeper. Everyone between the king and the beggar. They meet at a tavern. They clatter away, with picturesque old London behind them, and in front the open country of Kent, now breaking into the tender green of spring. Various are the moods of such a company. Often

enough the merriment gets out of bounds. But the saint, to whose shrine they journey, puts a halo of sanctity over all. And we can readily imagine that people such as Chaucer gives us had a hand in writing these plays. The grave Clerk of Oxenford who told the tale of the patient Griselda. The good Parson who discoursed on the seven deadly sins. The Nun's Priest with his pretty turn for comedy. And others less edifying. That rascal with the yellow hair, the Pardoner, who frightened folks out of their money with his sermons, and who told that grim story of the robbers and death. Then, too, the monk who specialized in tragedy. And as women aspired to literary honours, surely, the gentle little prioress, who sang divine service through her dainty nose, and told of the little boy of seven who, out of love for the Virgin, learned her song, that he might sing it at Christmas. And such, too, would be the audience collected round the stage. We know that the Wife of Bath, with her monstrous hat and red stockings, was a mighty frequenter of such

shows. She would be well in front, as she was deaf. And there would be the Miller; the Sailor back from a voyage; the Cook, a little husky from the Southwark ale; that young dandy, the squire, in his smart clothes, whistling and singing; and of course the Reeve, for he was a carpenter, and had he not had a hand in making the Ark for the scene of *Noah's Flood*?

These religious plays became popular all over Europe. Crowds flocked to the pageants from daylight till dark. They loved the brutal realism, the coarse buffoonery, and revelled in the hideous details of torture. We know that the actor who played the Christ had often to be taken down from the Cross, lest he should die. We know that those who played the parts of devils were so burnt that they were often maimed for life. We can imagine the zest with which the crowd followed every situation. Self-important citizens loved to play Herod or Pilate, and have the chance of swaggering and ranting. We can picture the good people's delight in the discomfiture of such bullies. Those who stood in awe of

their wives must have hugged themselves when Mrs. Noah was beaten black and blue. How many would roar with glee to get a bit of their own back from the devil! The intimacy of the whole thing is almost grotesque to us in its childishness. Heaven, Earth, Hell—these became a three-storied house, with God upstairs, humanity on the ground-floor, and the devils in the basement. We possess some of the books in which the accounts were kept, and they make us smile. Here are some of the items. A pair of gloves for God—so much. A leather coat for Christ. A pair of mittens for Noah. So much for setting the world on fire. So much for mending hell-mouth. And, mixed up with all this, bills for beer and beef.

This uncouth medley of crude simplicities and intimacies must not turn us from these plays in contempt. We must not miss the finer things in them. They were never meant to be literary from the first. And they passed into the vernacular when the vernacular was little more than a dialect :—

Grimy and rough-cast still from Babel's bricklayers.

In our own country the English language was but just extricating itself from attempts to repress it. In the year 1320, the author of the *Cursor Mundi*, a popular rendering of biblical and other stories, insists on English for the English, not as a truism, but as a novelty, for which sound reasons must be given. English had been despised and rejected. It had indeed "lien among the pots," and was awaiting the alchemists who should give it the wings of silver and the feathers of yellow gold. And in other countries language was being shaped into form and comeliness. The rawness, the rudeness, the angularities, in the style of these plays must not shock us too much. And as the speech, so were the speakers and the hearers. Their awe and wonder were the awe and wonder of children. They liked things plain. There was little sense of "the wild abyss of God's hiddenness." The characters and scenes became a part of their own lives and experiences. Yet often we find some spontaneous intuition that is startling in its effect. A bit of human

emotion, some simple phrase, showing true insight. We are reminded of things hidden from the wise and prudent, but revealed unto babes. They realized the grandeur of this drama in their own way, for Christ is the central figure, "unsoiled and unaffected by his surroundings." Amid all the noise, hatred, and vulgar abuse he remains calm and dignified. The writers have not lost their sense of proportion, and he is spiritually supreme. The appreciation is always genuine. Its expression varies in the different versions. It can be most dignified; sometimes it is blunt and familiar. Let me quote a short dialogue from a German Easter play. The scene is the Betrayal. Peter has just cut off the ear of Malchus, the servant of the high priest.

MALCHUS: *Woe is me, I have been badly damaged in this business. I have lost my ear, and they call me a fool for my pains.*

JESUS (to Peter): *Peter, put up your sword, for he who will take revenge with the sword shall perish by it.* (To the Jews): *Bring me the wounded man, I will put on his ear again.*

MALCHUS: *Master, I pray that you will heal me.*

JESUS: *I can put on your ear perfectly well, and I will do so.*

MALCHUS (to one of his comrades): *Comrade, dear friend, have a look at my ear. Pull it, and try if it is all right.*

COMRADE (pulls the ear of Malchus): *Your ear is all right, comrade,—so it seems to me.*

MALCHUS: *Jesus is a good fellow; he knows how to put an ear on.*

This is not reverent, and it is simple almost to clumsiness. But it has a frank sincerity in it—a touch of that faith which Jesus found in the Roman soldier, but not in Israel.

And here is a dialogue between Jesus and his Mother from a French Mystery play of the fifteenth century. The classic tradition has always held in France, and the austerity of this scene makes the human all the more poignant. Is there not a reminder of Corneille, who is to write that master-piece, *Polyeucte, The Christian Martyr?* The Mother pleads with Jesus before his death, and in this conversation there is nothing in the death which is forgotten. Every incident is used with consummate skill to intensify the dialogue.

MARY: *At least you will have mercy and die a short and easy death.*

JESUS : *I shall die a very bitter death.*
MARY : *But not a low, disgraceful death.*
JESUS : *Indeed, a very shameful death.*
MARY : *But far away, then, you will promise.*
JESUS : *In the midst of all my friends.*
MARY : *Let it be in the night, I pray.*
JESUS : *No, in the very hour of noon.*
MARY : *But, then, do die like the barons.*
JESUS : *I shall die between two thieves.*
MARY : *Let it be under the earth and in silence.*
JESUS : *I shall hang high up on the cross.*
MARY : *At least you will have clothes on.*
JESUS : *I shall be nailed to the cross quite naked.*
MARY : *Wait till you are an old man.*
JESUS : *In the bloom of my youth.*
MARY : *Do not allow your blood to be shed.*

Jesus then gives a realistic description of the manner of his death. To this the Mother replies : *You have nothing but harsh answers to a mother's prayers.* Whereupon he says : *The Scriptures must be fulfilled.*

The pathos of these terse sentences makes us wince. We have here a delicate revelation of Christianity, not as a system, but in a living scene of breaking hearts.

But I want to talk to you particularly about the English Mystery Plays, and to put before you a few ideas that have come to me whilst comparing the treatment of some of the same scenes in the various cycles. We

have four large cycles of plays: the *York*, the *Towneley*, the *Chester*, and the *Coventry* plays. The first three of these cycles were performed by the various trade-guilds, in the open air. The *York* and *Towneley* on Corpus Christi day; the *Chester* at Whitsuntide. The *Coventry* plays are a cycle by themselves. They are not the cycle of the trade-guilds of Coventry, nearly all of which have perished.

We may date these plays from the latter part of the fourteenth to the middle of the fifteenth centuries. Each cycle was probably the work of one writer assisted by others. They follow the plan that I have already sketched. Certain *Old Testament* scenes lead up to the coming of Christ, then the *New Testament* story is dramatized, ending with the Last Judgment. The writers had not a free hand. The subject was provided, the scope definitely limited, the text on which their work was based was supplied. They could draw on the *Apocryphal New Testament* and other books for scenes and characters and certain turns in the story. But they

had to work within stereotyped lines, and it is remarkable what they did, and, I think, most significant. They humanized the drama, breaking away to some extent from the hard, dogmatic setting. If they had only introduced humour, or only introduced sentiment, perhaps their work would be hardly worth our study. But my suggestion is, that behind these elements of humour and sentiment is a very real critical force, showing the reaction of human feeling on theology. This tendency from the theological to the human does not work progressively. It keeps breaking in, and is due to the dramatic possibilities of the situation. I can only hope to illustrate it briefly from a few scenes.

The York plays were probably in the main the work of one writer. Perhaps a monk. He has a distinctly didactic purpose. And though he has an eye for dramatic effect, and some sense of humour, he keeps to that purpose. It predominates throughout. In the scene of Cain and Abel, for instance, his Cain is an ill-tempered churl who cannot see

that God who gives all has any need of gifts from man. But the character is not developed, and the play is colourless. Now if we compare this scene with the same scene in the *Towneley* collection, we find an immense advance in treatment. The writer of the Towneley play is a realist and a humorist. His Cain is a foul-mouthed rustic, sullen and grasping. But he has a real grievance, and he is not afraid to state it. He has worked hard, and yet the crops are bad. Where is the justice of his now being told to offer the best to God? And he loathes the pious humility of Abel. These constant sermons exasperate him. He hates his brother, probably because Abel is the better man. He is, but he is the less human of the two. Cain's rebellion, for all its blasphemy, has its origin in that sense of the injustice of things which hardens some, and softens others, in their course through life. It is the same spirit that afterwards flamed out in Byron's version of this story. And when Byron called his poem a Mystery, he was right, and the smug Bishop Heber was

wrong in asserting its spirit to be contrary to that of the old Mysteries. When we remember that the didactic purpose of the Cain and Abel play was to show Abel as the first innocent victim of sin, we see that in the *Towneley* version a genuine human emotion is in conflict with that purpose.

Again, if we take a scene where humour was the principal ingredient added. In the *York* version of the Noah play, Noah's wife does not want to come into the Ark. Her complaint is that she has not been consulted, and she argues the matter at some length. In the *Towneley* version Noah and she come to blows, and the scene is one of rough horse-play. She gets the worst of it, and is beaten black and blue. But the *Chester* version has an idea running through these humours. Mrs. Noah frankly prefers the company of her good gossips at the ale-house to the rather stodgy family party in the Ark. She tells Noah to row away wherever he likes, and get another wife. In the end she is forcibly brought in by her sons. But when Noah welcomes her into his boat in the

superior manner of forgiveness, she is not to be conciliated, and gives him a good slap. No doubt all this made the Ark seem a more homely place to the good folks. We, with our experience of the woman question, not only laugh, but think.

But the most striking example of the part that human emotion played in the development of this drama is to be seen in the play of *Abraham's Sacrifice of Isaac.* The sacrifice of Isaac prefigured the sacrifice of Christ. In the *York* play the writer does not lose sight of this aspect. The natural emotions of Abraham as a father are brought out. He would sooner lose his own life than thus lose his son. But he must bow to God's will. "And so farewell for once and all." Isaac in the same way meekly submits—a lamb to the slaughter. And all he asks before he shall die is that his father shall forgive him any wrong he may have done. The writer of the *Coventry* version accepts this submission of Abraham and his son, but in a totally different spirit, for he grasps the human tragedy of such obedience. A

modern writer, Arnold Wynne, has pictured the scene as suggested by the words of this version. It is delightful. The old man dotes on this bright young boy. With outstretched arms he calls him to him, kisses him, and blesses him. The little boy runs off. The old man, left alone, thanks God with a full heart for the comfort of this child, and prays Him to save him wherever he may be. Immediately comes the awful command. The heart-broken father bows in obedience. We see the child, with a bundle of faggots on his shoulder, trotting beside his father. He looks up into the old kind face, now drawn and set with anguish.

YSAAC: *Ffayr fadyr, ye go ryght stylle,*
I pray yow, fadyr, speke onto me.

When he comes to do the deed, Abraham's heart fails him. He dare not rebel. But there is something of a muttered protest.

ABRAHAM: *The wylle of God must nedys be done!*
To werke his wylle I seyd nevyr nay;
But yit the ffadyr to sle[1] *the sone.*

[1] *Slay.*

It is Isaac who steadfastly encourages him to strike. But surely here the theological issue is a little blurred by tears. Abraham's emotion is not only human, but it has a moral note in it; whereas Isaac urging him on, lest disobedience should bring damnation, seems a little strained. Again, in the *Chester* version the submission is emphasized, especially in the case of Isaac. When they have come to the sacrifice, the son cannot understand why his father is so sad. Is he afraid of anything? Then the father tells him. At first the boy is frightened. Would that his mother were there, for she would beg his life on her knees. Abraham tells him that it is God's command. At this he submits. The passage has its own beauty. He tries to persuade his father that at home, among his other sons, he will come to forget him—only he must never tell his mother the truth. But the writer of the *Towneley* play adopts a much bolder and freer treatment. He only uses the conventional theological idea for his own purpose of intensifying the dramatic situation. Abraham has got to slay his son.

He is in agony. But he must do it. So the dramatist seizes on this conflict in Abraham. The boy is a boy, and he is terrified. He cries for mercy. He implores his father if he has done wrong to beat him. But he has done no wrong, the father assures him. What, then, can he do? Alas! nothing. Then: "Mercy! When I am dead, who shall be your son? Who shall be to you what I have been?"

The distracted father implores him to be silent. The knife is bare. The boy shudders at it. The father turns him, so that he cannot see it. Still the boy pleads: "What have I done, father? What have I said? I love you, father." "So do I you," replies the heart-broken father. Then the boy begs to be saved for his mother's sake. Abraham breaks down. He pretends that he has forgotten something, and goes aside. His eyes are blinded with tears. Through the pathos of his words resentment is struggling:—

To slo[1] *hym thus I thynk grete syn.*

[1] *Slay.*

I want you to ponder on the significance of these things. They may be only hints and glimmerings of light, only stammerings of speech, but they are quaint, instructive, and wistful. We boast of the higher criticism as a modern thing. After all, the glory of its accomplishment is to have made the Bible a human book, and to have softened the harsher elements of religion, by insisting on the value of sentiment and morality. Did not the old writers of these plays prepare the way? Bringing the Bible out of the church and among the people by means of this drama, making its story an intimate part of the people's life, they gave freer play to the heart and mind. In an age of hardness and brutality they touched finer feelings. They appealed to pity as well as to terror. And the result was that some of those cruel dogmas of religion, unanswered by the doctors and professors, were answered in the market place, the home, and the nursery.

And all that we find in the varied treatment of the *Old Testament* in these cycles we shall find in the treatment of the *New*

Testament. The writer of the *York* plays, with his didactic purpose, specially emphasizes the scenes that have to do with the Passion of Christ. He brings out the hatred of Annas and Caiaphas, the attitude of Pilate, and the remorse of Judas, with much power. So anxious is he to bring home to his audience the full meaning of the death of Christ, that he inserts a scene of some audacity. He shows us Satan, trying to prevent that death, because it threatens his dominion over man. We are in the chamber of Dame Percula, Pilate's wife. She and her family go to bed. All sleep, and then—"enter Satan." Whispering in her ear, he tells her of a gentleman, Jesus, who, by the craft of scoundrels, is to be unjustly judged before her husband. This scene is found in the *Coventry* play, with a quaint stage direction: "Here xal the devyl gon to Pylatys wyf, the corteyn drawyn as she lyth in bedde." The *Coventry* plays are full of quaintness. Joseph, when he is to be married to Mary, shows the caution of the peasant, and is only persuaded to marry so

young a wife after much hesitancy. There is also a special tenderness in the treatment of the Virgin in these plays. When she is married, her mother bids her good-bye with the words: "ffare weyl, Mary, my swete fflowre." And at the Crucifixion hers is the deepest note of pathos. The scene, as treated in this version, reminds me of the old ballad-poetry. Jesus from the Cross has spoken to others, but to her he is dumb. She makes this complaint to him:—

O my sone! my sone! my derlyng dere!
What have I defendyd[1] *the?*
Thou hast spoke to alle tho that ben here,
And not o word thou spekyst to me!

To the Jewys thou art ful kende,
Thou hast forgeve al here[2] *mysdede;*
And the thef thou hast in mende,
For onys haskyng mercy hefne[3] *is his mede.*

A! my sovereyn Lord, why whylt thou not speke
To me that am thi modyr in peyn for thy wrong?
A! hert! hert! why whylt thou not breke?
That I were out of this sorwe so stronge!

Jesus replies to this. Whereupon she runs and throws her arms round the Cross in her distress. Mary Magdalene expostu-

[1] Offended. [2] Their. [3] Heaven.

lates with her, telling her that she is adding to the pain of Jesus. To this Mary answers :—

I pray you alle lete me ben here,
And hang me up here on this tre,
Be my frend and sone that me is so dere;
ffor ther he is, ther wold I be.

Here the realism is softened down. In the *Towneley* version of the Crucifixion it is grim and uncompromising. The hard, business-like seriousness of the men who put Christ on the Cross makes us shudder. He is silent, and then comes a protest, full of suffering dignity. But, in contrast to this, we have the treatment of the *Shepherds' Play* in the same cycle. This is just a piece of English rusticity, simple, cunning, comic, and ever young.

The scene opens with a shepherd. He is very cold and grumpy. He is feeling the economic problem, and has a grievance against landlords. To grumble is an Englishman's privilege, and he feels that it does him good to get it off his chest. To him enters a second shepherd. He, too, has a griev-

ance. But his is domestic. He is married to a shrew of a wife, a mixture of thistle and briar; a very bristly person. She is as fat as a whale, and secretes vinegar. The talk between these two is leading to a dispute, when a third shepherd comes on the scene. He has a grievance as well, and the other two forget their quarrel to listen to him. His trouble is the weather. A supper and a song dissipate their cares for a time. Later on they are joined by a fourth rustic, Mak, a sly fellow, with a bad reputation as a sheep-stealer. And that night, while they are all sleeping on the grass, Mak steals a ram from the flock, gets it home, and hides it in the cradle. The others have their suspicions, and go to Mak's house. But they are told that his wife has just been brought to bed of a fine boy, and must on no account be disturbed. They pry about on tip-toe, but are so heartily abused that they are glad to get outside. Then the good, simple souls remember that they have not given the baby a present of any kind—not even a farthing. One of them goes back to the cottage, while

the others wait outside. He apologises to Mak for returning, but he would like to give the baby sixpence. Mak is surly and ungracious. He bids him be off, or he will wake the baby, and make it cry. The shepherd persists, and so discovers the trick.

MAK: *Ney, do way: he slepys,*
PASTOR: *Me thynk he pepys.*
MAK: *When he wakyns he wepys.*
I pray you go hence.
PASTOR: *Gyf me lefe hym to kys, and lyft up the clowtt.*
What the deville is this? he has a long snowte.

The shepherd soon discovers that, in addition to a long snout, the baby has two horns and four legs. He has never seen anything like this in a cradle before. Though Mak's wife comes to the rescue by saying that the fairies have done this to the child, the others are not convinced, and Mak is tossed in a blanket. Quite satisfied, the shepherds go back to the fields. Then an angel appears singing. They approve of the song. It is not out in a crochet. They approve of the angel's message. So they go to Bethlehem, and we find them at the

cradle of Jesus, and the scene is touching in its simplicity. They have brought their presents. The first salutes the child as the one who shall defeat the evil one. Then the baby smiles. His whole tone instantly changes. He offers a bob of cherries, with these words :—

Lo, he merys ;
Lo, he leghys, my swetyng,
A welfare metyng.
I have holden my hetyng,[1]
Have a bob of cherys.

The second offers a bird; and the third a ball, that the child may play bat and ball. These are his words :—

Haylle, derlyng dere, fulle of godhede,
I pray the be here when that I have nede.
Haylle ! swete is thy chere : my hart wold blede
To se the sytt here in so poore wede[2]
With no pennys.
Haylle ! put furthe thy dalle.[3]
I bryng the bot[4] *a balle*
Have and play the with alle,
And go to the tenys.

I have told you that religious drama began with the Easter Resurrection Play in the

[1] Promise. [2] Dress. [3] Fist. [4] But.

church. The Resurrection Play passed through many stages in the process of development. The character of Mary Magdalene was, of course, prominent in this story. And the dramatist saw her possibilities, for the dramatist has always been on the side of the angels in preferring one sinner that repenteth to ninety and nine just persons. So we have a fifteenth-century play —*Mary Magdalene*. It combines every kind of religious drama. It is a Miracle-play, for it deals with a saint. It is a Mystery-play, for it shows scenes from the life of Christ. It is a Morality, for it exhibits personifications of the virtues and vices. Within these conventions it makes a wide popular appeal. There are more than fifty scenes, and sixty characters. We have the prince of devils on a special stage with hell underneath it. He boasts of a subtlety such as was never shown even by the wily Ulysses. And he will need this, for Mary is a lady of high degree. His temptations, however, show no surprising novelty. They are drink, and a young gallant. Mary resorts to an inn at Jerusa-

lem. Now we meet with a jolly taverner who quotes from his wine-list with gusto. To the inn also comes the roystering gallant. He is most anxious not to be mistaken for one of the middle class. And, being a gentleman, he would like to flirt with a pretty barmaid. Eventually Mary departs with him, to the great joy of the wily Satan. Thus we are prepared for the contrast that follows. First, Mary asleep in the arbour, then weeping at the feet of Jesus, then in the garden where her Lord was buried. But this is not the end, for repentance is followed by good works. Mary converted, will convert others. This gives a fine opportunity to transport us to romantic lands of heathendom. "Here shall enter a ship with a merry song." Singing being thirsty work, the ship-boy is ordered to bring drink. He is impudent, and so is cuffed and clouted. Mary sails in the ship, and eventually reaches her destination, where she converts the king and queen. They return with her to the Holy Land. And the play ends, with the death and ascension of Mary.

So at last we have come to see the religious appeal mixed frankly with the secular appeal. Christianity has been brought into the world, and must take its chance among common things. We can understand that the Church set its face against these liberties. It was scandalized. Yet there was, perhaps, some lack of insight on its part. I must leave it to you to decide whether we do not catch an echo of the old complaint, "Why does your Master eat with publicans and sinners?"

But I am certain of this, that this entertainment, being really popular, and not a cult, was sound at heart. The good folks relished the broad joke and the "bit of life," but they loved a moral. And the moral came with the Morality play. I need not trace the stages in the development of the Morality. As the Mystery came out of the Church Service, the Morality came, as it were, from the Sermon. It is the application of the doctrine that faith must lead on to works. The characters in the Morality were allegorical. There was man, represented by Everyman. He was surrounded

by figures who personified the struggle of his life. There were his good angel, his bad angel, the devil, and a crowd of virtues and sins. Here was "God's Athlete" on the stage, making trial before the spectators. There is something fine in this conception, and we have many interesting Moralities. And one that is admirable—*Everyman*. This is a great work by some master hand. The solemn opening is followed by the speeches of God and Death. Then the jaunty entrance of Everyman, to whom Death addresses his curt summons, which throws him into a panic. From this situation the play is developed to its pathetic and serene conclusion, when Everyman is saved by the offices of Good-deeds. The theme of the Morality tended to become monotonous. But by that time the Religious drama had fulfilled its mission. It had brought Christianity home to the hearts of the people in the Mystery play; and in the Morality play had emphasized the conduct that ought to follow belief.

And in doing this it had prepared the way

for something greater than itself. Religious Drama was followed by a drama so splendid and capacious, that in the rising tide of its poetry all the past seems for the moment to be obliterated. Is there any connection between the theatre of the Middle Ages and that of the Elizabethans? The boundaries of the world had been burst asunder. East and west of the Mediterranean huge seas and great continents had opened out. And this new drama is of their proportion and magnitude. The roll of mighty waters is in its verse, deep calling unto deep. And its scenic background is that strange new world. "Come on, Sir, now you set your foot on shore in Novo Orbe." Yet, for all that, continuity was not broken. Mediæval drama bequeathed to the Elizabethan its sprawling, uncouth form. This could not have been otherwise. For with the exception of Ben Jonson, none of the Elizabethans understood classical construction. But with this uncouth form came something by way of compensation. Surely from the Religious play the Elizabethan got that sense of the

consequence of life, that vision of man set between the infinities and eternities. Shakespeare's drama is a drama of the soul. It is held together from within, not from without. It is the characters who give the cohesion, and not the plot. Lear and Othello exist in terms of humanity, not in terms of time, place, or costume. Their martyrdom is a universal event. Hamlet, at the grave of Ophelia, with the grinning skull in his hand, turning the world inside out, until the bones show—this is mediævalism, interpreted by genius, and converted into the drama of the soul of man paralyzed by appalling knowledge of the truth.

And in those wonderful History Plays, how subtle is the influence of mediæval drama! Marlowe, full of the intoxication of the Renaissance, had set the Machiavellian man on his stage in all the daring pride and lust of life. He owes something to Seneca. He loves rant and bombast like Herod and Pilate. And Shakespeare has given us one of Marlowe's characters in *Richard III*. A sinister, but rather stagey figure, with

reminders of the strutting Herod, the chuckling Devil, the sniggering Vice. But Shakespeare never created such a man as hero again. It is as if, struck with remorse for Richard's victim, Henry VI, he suddenly adopts the Christian mood. Richard II is his first great human character. Broken on the pomps and vanities of monarchy, he rises to a royalty of sorrow. So, too, proud Bolingbroke is broken. Henry V is hardly the last word of Shakespeare on kings. The History Plays are splashed with blood and tears, and the crown of kingship is often one of thorns—

for within the hollow crown
That rounds the mortal temples of a king
Keeps death his court, and there the antic sits.

And the women of Shakespeare, what do they not owe to mediævalism in the charm and grace of their chastity?—

Upon those lips, the sweet fresh buds of youth,
The holy dew of prayer lies, like pearl
Dropt from the opening eyelids of the morn
Upon a bashful rose.

But these women are to be found in the forest, the garden, or the city, and they have none of the strained and hectic prurience of the convent ideal. Their " rosy pudency " is not of the cloister. They are wholesome, healthy, and might marry colonials. But they have something about them that brings to the lips, even of those who are evil, words of worship and adoration. Thus Iachimo, the sensualist, in Imogen's bedchamber speaks in awe :—

the flame o' the taper
Bows towards her, and would under-peep her lids.

The age of the Elizabethans was followed by an age, of which it has been said that Englishmen then became the people of a book—the *Bible.* The *Bible* certainly imparted a grand seriousness to English character—the feeling of living ever in the " great Task-master's eye." But the reading of the *Bible* was too partial. It had too much of the fierce exclusiveness of the *Old Testament.* And its *New Testament* was the Pauline epistles, robbed of their humanness,

and turned into a system that separates and damns. The Puritan was too masculine. He scorned childish things too much. He forgot the Incarnation, and knew not the Christ after the flesh, but a Christ of ink and paper. So he knocked the Virgin's head off and destroyed the theatre. But human nature must have its drama. The theatre came back. It was brought back by cynical men of the world, under the patronage of a merry monarch. Restoration drama is a fashionable cult to-day. It has been so abused in the past by professors of literature with nice minds that there has come a reaction. And rightly so. Restoration drama is far too witty and caustic to do much harm to anyone. But it is far too pleased with itself to be aware of the paradoxes of the spiritual life of man. Its tragedies ended in mouthing emptiness and sentimentalism. Its comedy is a brilliant thing. But when it is compared with really great comedy—that of Molière, for example—it seems but a masquerade. Molière makes us see beyond the painted ceiling, and

makes us feel what is under the parquet flooring, and his comedy is often tragedy gilded over.

Writers like Farquhar, Foote, Goldsmith, and Sheridan could not save English comedy from its perdition of futility. When it had reached its lowest depth, a breath of inspiration came from the north, with Ibsen. He brought us a new kind of Morality-play, wherein everyman and everywoman walked amid figures who were incarnations of modern social forces. And this child of the old Vikings called on the individual to fight desperately against these forces. Under this inspiration a number of admirable plays have been written in which the problems of modern life are handled with power and a supreme naturalness. But something is lacking. Is it the fault of modern life? Is it that we have lost faith in the individual? Has the trend of thought persuaded us that man is only the plaything of evolution, a by-product in an economic process? The modern play has hardly any individuals. It

is crowded with victims. Consequently, there is no tragedy. Bernard Shaw lately tried to give us a tragedy. Did he succeed? He gave us two brilliant expositions of what tragedy is. One in the form of a preface; the other in the form of a play. He explained most reasonably why St. Joan was a victim. But he did not bring us under the spell of her magic. Indeed, he revealed himself as the complete example of one of his wittiest sayings: "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." In comedy, Shaw has done really great things, for he has created characters whose purpose has unmitigated life in it, and who show up society as a panoply of scarecrows. That fine dramatist, Galsworthy, accepts the rather hopeless outlook. His analysis is scientifically accurate and charged with passion. His characters are hunted fugitives, caught in the relentless machinery of our civilization. A full, yet repressed, emotion of pity gives his understanding its fine and delicate play amid every variety of such situations. He has

no equal in this. But the result is ironical. He has no solution, and disdains a cheap ready-made one.

The modern theatre seems to me to reflect modern life. Modern life is a machine-made and standardized thing. And everywhere are those who are beating against the bars of sameness and convention. This unrest shows itself in the post-war play, in a striving after an ideal of individualism, that does not know what it wants, that is much too self-conscious to be strong, and that finds its delight, not in what is positive, but in what is negative —cock-tails, night-clubs, swear-words, and risky situations.

There are those who think that the cure for these evils is a return to mediævalism, to ecclesiasticism, to churchism or chapelism. I confess that I do not see much hope in this direction. To the great mass, religion on the old lines has not much more meaning than would have the old Religious Drama on the modern stage.

But never was there a time when Christianity was more seriously considered in its

bearings on human life. This Christianity waits to be stated fearlessly in such a way that it shall inform life with new ideals. And life so informed will bring back to the theatre a drama that is religious, because it is the sincere expression of those ideals.

O brave new world
That has such people in 't!

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